

Tweedledum and Tweedledee: Problems In Company Course Design

By Massimo Mangilli-Climpson

Contrary to general opinion, schools, and particularly private schools-have aims that are comparable to those of business: they provide services and obtain profits. Without a healthy financial base, these schools would quickly be bankrupted, and replaced by more commercially efficient concerns (Handy and Aitken 1986).

Success is not solely dependent upon the uniqueness or the quality of the marketable services, but also upon location, the amount of competition, economic overhead, and general cost for running and marketing specialized business English courses for adults. Most important of all is the demand that the customers register for such program services.

This paper describes the experience of a small, private language school organizing foreign language courses (both on and off-site) for company employees with mixed language abilities.

Studying the Market

Before entering a market with a new product or service, it is normal procedure for a business to send out teams of researchers and marketing specialists to sound out prospects for the new endeavor.

Similarly, at the start of every new school year, private language schools in Italy campaign vigorously for new students in the local press and on television. But no new school has undertaken or successfully completed serious market research of local businesses, partly because of a lack of cooperation from the firms themselves.

To be fair, the personnel departments of local businesses often do not have the time to fill in questionnaires, or submit to independent interviews on such issues as staff recruitment and selection, English language needs, and company policy towards retraining.

This does not mean that corporations do not provide schools with needed information, but that a time frame of a year or two may be incurred. After a period when the corporations come to know the schools as professionally reliable, they recognize that by providing the schools with the data, they can benefit from a well-tailored language program for their employees.

So, in contrast with the norm in other economic sectors in Italy, it is the companies that make the first moves in contacting language institutes for special programs, and not vice versa.

Harmonizing the Needs of Tweedledum and Tweedledee

The language school and its instructors may meet a new class in less than perfect conditions. Students may show mixed language abilities, a wide range in age and position, different personal attitudes towards the target language and culture, and (if the course is offered and paid for by the firm), a difference in motivation, commitment, and dedication to regular attendance and study.

It will almost immediately become clear that a difference in perception exists between what the company executives feel their employees need and what objectives the employees hold. This difference is like the two contrary character twins, Tweedledum and Tweedledee, in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* : and if these differences are not resolved, there is likelihood of future tension arising, placing real obstacles upon language learning.

The firm's decision to invest in human capital by retraining or "upskilling" its personnel is certain to be linked to a general desire to improve the company's professional market image and competence to deal with foreign clients-whether suppliers or buyers. But the employees themselves may not see the course in the light of work-related goals but see it serving their general interests, such as travel, meeting English-speaking friends (and possibly future spouses), helping their children with school, or for finding more lucratively satisfying occupations. And yet, they also need the language for their work. Through interviews with their language instructors, these employees can specify which work activities require English, thereby providing the teacher with important input for drawing up an acceptable, working syllabus.

As the main interest of the company is to ensure that those attending the language course will be satisfied, it will be wise if the school, represented by the course teacher, negotiates directly with her/his class to discover what they hope to achieve from the course. Obviously, the school's success in producing acceptable quality services will give it more value-added bargaining power should the firm desire to extend the contract with additional courses.

Following a short entry test-multiple choice grammatical exercise and an oral interview-the instructor has a firsthand understanding of the language level of the students and precise evidence of the type of language repair work that should be provided and incorporated into the course.

Hollett (1993) has identified three distinct approaches to organizing a company course:

1. adopting a commercially prepared syllabus (textbook, audio and videotapes);
2. identifying learner needs and adopting a variety of authentic or didactically simplified materials from a multitude of genres and registers; and
3. allowing the learners to explain what they need for their work.

In my experience a course design involves being open-minded and flexible, not rigidly adhering to predetermined models, but treating every new experience as unique. Each new course requires creativity.

As Hollett admits, her strategies are stereotypes that can be revised. It is possible to use her models at the micro-level: negotiating units, themes, or tasks with the students themselves. It was this particular modified version of Hollet's model which I adopted in the preparation of our course.

It was convenient to deploy ready-made tested materials. Students needed a textbook as a point of reference to measure their own learning. It was also important in the company course for the teachers to be seen as efficiently prepared, and the sight of a published text immediately gives a more authoritative impression than ad hoc photocopied handout matter. However, all commercially produced materials are incomplete as they are written for classes with differing needs. Thus, it is essential that the teacher and all members of the class work together closely, each constantly negotiating and reevaluating to see if student needs are being met, even asking them to bring specialist material to the class to supplement what the instructor provided. With this direct cooperative assistance, the teacher will become more aware of their needs and more willing to draw upon authentic language to design teaching materials which, as Henry Widdowson remarked, can "activate language learning and language use in general." (1984:199)

Unlike Falter's similar study of an L2 course of German engineering undergraduates which focused on their presumed future careers (1991), i.e., the materials presented by the teacher and students were based on a hypothesis of what their occupational needs were, the present course was truly a learner-centered syllabus, designed in cooperation with the learners themselves.

The Course and the Materials

An eight month course (80 contact hours) spent after regular working hours should not be an extension of a manager's intensive course or it is certain to drive clients to boredom and non-attendance. The initial questionnaire will have indicated the interests, needs, and the expectations of the learners; so the instructor, (who is permanently under the scrutiny of the clients) cannot hoodwink them into engaging in class activities that are not of any real practical value.

Furthermore, the wide range of language levels requires that the course take on task/skill-and content/theme-based approaches, focusing on language structures, situations, and content-three different learning variables to permit learners to select for themselves the most suitable learning strategies for the language matter provided.

A course for a middle-sized company in the food and drink sector (350 employees), that has national and international networks, focused on speaking, listening, and reading skills to perform tasks like answering the telephone, presenting lectures, and oral paraphrasing (reiterating points during a discussion that may be unclear). Once these tasks were carried out by the learners on the job, their responses were subsequently reported back and commented on by the class and utilized by the instructor as authentic follow-up simulations-cornerstones of new activities.

Moreover, as it was expected that certain members of the class would be absent for up to ten days at conferences, workshops, and trade fairs, basic study skills, such as using monolingual

dictionaries and taking notes, were inserted into the course. They were also encouraged to make full use of the school's resource center to listen and view as much language material as they and their instructor deemed appropriate for preparing class assignments and, in the long-term, widening their linguistic competence.

The students' presence at the center, and the teacher's supervision there, allowed for more individualized attention, as when older learners, more attuned to traditional grammar-translation and uncomfortable working with more modern communicative methods, could be given time to review those aspects of the course that caused the most problems. Thus, the more the learners cooperated with the instructor, the more they could claim a share in the course's success.

The course was centered on two types of activities: the first was instructor-learner based with structures taught in a situation context. The second was learner-learner based, with students presenting lectures, or discussing selected project-work, and the teacher acting as a consultant giving advice at the preparatory stage, only monitoring the discussion for possible errors to be treated in successive activities.

After the presentation of the language structures, practice for accuracy was first carried out in small groups or pairs using open or closed-guided activities as role plays, sociodramas, simulations (Di Pietro 1990), or by recording voice-over dialogues to silent films (Mangilli-Climpson 1990). The language structures were then recycled for fluency practice through what Peter Skehan (1993:23) has referred to as "task families," where tasks resemble one another, and permit the use of similar expressions. This requires the learners to communicate using the new language forms rather than relying on past, fossilized utterances. Consequently the students become aware that they are mastering previously unfamiliar language, which is a positive sign of encouragement and progress.

In the second type of activity, project-work, the students adopted the roles of sales representatives of selected goods and services, e.g. holiday tours, cosmetics, luxury cars, or life-insurance. The activity involved a group working in private on its chosen sector, and then delegating a spokesperson to make a presentation on the benefits of its products, supported by short off-air recorded television commercials, tabular statistics, and reports.

Results of the Course

The main outcomes of the course both for the learners and the faculty can be examined in terms of short-term and long-term results.

During the course, the learners appeared to shift their attitudes from one of disbelief at being given the responsibility of collaborating as co-designers, to one of complete enthusiasm and cooperation. Indeed, they enjoyed wearing an expert's hat in assisting the instructor in collecting and preparing course material-especially when required to explain technical jargon. Moreover, as the language instructor was identified as someone akin to a production-line manager, who wished to obtain results after the instructional stage, the course members were eager to work

hard, constantly demanding monitoring to identify errors, and in certain cases even requesting additional tasks to be done outside the classroom.

Though only eighty percent completed the course-the remainder dropping out because of the heavy work load-this group was surprised by their progress and the pleasure they had gained from the course. They had increased their confidence in using English and had expanded their vocabulary-their criteria of progress and achievement. They did, indeed, improve in both areas as they were able to fulfill all their tasks in the class, initially with considerable support from the teacher, but gradually with much less, using learnt skills. They still, however, reported they found listening comprehension difficult; and they felt grammar and pronunciation were important areas they had yet to master.

For the long term, the course demonstrated that there was a market for such a program, and the students' enthusiasm reassured the course designers that the program had achieved satisfactory results.

Furthermore, certain members of the class chose to go beyond the confines of the course so as to improve their L2 by partaking in non-curricular activities as, for example, attending English film nights at the school, asking information about hiring English *au pairs*, and arranging for English-speaking children to come and stay with their families. In other words, they had ceased to consider English as just another school subject, but as a skill that had to be practiced and used on all occasions. It also signified that if good will is demonstrated to clients, i.e. giving attention to individual problems, it is likely that students will view the new service favorably, and be willing to take part in other language activities. Once the learners' enthusiasm has been awakened, the reserves for learning and using the language can be tapped.

The success of the course also raised the image of the school; and when the company decided to renew its contract, as many new learners enrolled as were in the first course. This allowed the school to divide the course into language levels and occupational divisions, separating the technical and electronic staff from personnel in general management and administration, making the classes more homogeneous teaching units.

Thus as the conditions changed, with the arrival of different learners with particular needs, and different instructors with individual teaching philosophies, the Hollett model had to be modified further to arrive at solutions that were beneficial to all concerned.

Conclusion

Our experience with this company course has indicated the following:

1. It is possible to design a business course on the spur-of-the-moment and still remain professionally efficient and in control of the organization;

2. It is vital to allow learners to share in the running of the course and in directing their own learning;
3. Teachers must take an active part in producing materials that will conform to the needs of the learners.
4. Program models involving working adults should be treated solely as guides that must be fine-tuned to local and individual conditions, interests and needs;
5. Success can be realized only if there is creativity and goodwill on the part of the teacher. The goodwill will be transferred to the learners to help instill a conflict-free environment, the ideal setting for all learners of L2.
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Massimo Mangilli-Climpson teaches EAP/ESP courses to undergraduate students of economics at the Ca' Foscari University, Venice, and is Co-Director of L.C. and T.B. in Udine. He has published three books, and numerous articles and textbooks.

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